

From Ravel to Adès: Calder Quartet Fuses Old With New



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You don't think of a string quartet as a corporation. Neither, deep down, would Andrew Bulbrook, violinist of the [Calder Quartet](#). But the comparison interests him.

"After one of our very first engagements," Bulbrook says, "we were at this donor event, and a retired businessman asked us what our five-year plan was. It was the first time I had ever thought about it. I guess, if you look at what we're doing, like a good business we mix in long-term planning with the ability to shift when new factors are apparent."

For the Calder, who make their [Celebrity Series](#) debut performance February 20 at Jordan Hall, that means first and foremost exploring long-standing relationships with composers like Thomas Adès, Peter Eötvös, Christopher Rouse and Terry Riley — not to mention Beethoven, Mozart and Ravel — which culminates in multiple performances and recordings. But it also means spur of the moment collaborations that bring the group onstage with alternate bands like the Airborne Toxic Event and the Naked and the Famous.

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“It’s pretty neat how it all came to pass,” Bulbrook says of the group, which was founded in 1998 when the players were all studying at the University of Southern California’s Thornton School of Music. “I have an uncle I like to go fishing with, and when I was young he let me steer the boat for the first time. He said, ‘Pick a spot on the horizon, like a tree, and aim for that.’ That may not be exactly where you’re going to end up, and you make adjustments along the way. The destination was never actually the tree, but at least you were moving forward.”

The Calders — Bulbrook and violinist Benjamin Jacobson, violist Jonathan Moerschel, and cellist Eric Byers — bring a program that mixes newer works from Andrew Norman and Thomas Adès, with quartets from Ravel and Beethoven. Ravel’s F major quartet, with its compelling pizzicato-laced second movement, and Beethoven F minor, Opus 95, “Serioso,” will probably be familiar to most audiences. But Boston music lovers have already been introduced to Norman and to Adès as well.

From Norman, who was the Boston Modern Orchestra Project’s composer-in-residence from 2011-13, the Calders play “Sabina,” a short quartet that the composer has extracted from his larger work, “The Companion Guide to Rome.” (BMOP has recently released a recording of Norman’s symphony length piece “Play.”) And from Adès, the British composer who has had several works performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra and has also [appeared with the BSO as a guest conductor](#), the Calders play the linked set of seven miniatures entitled “Arcadiana.”

For Bulbrook, the distinction between newer works and standard repertory is not as simple as it seems. “We first became aware of Adès’ ‘Arcadiana’ in the early 2000s,” he says, “and we dedicated ourselves to it. Later, we met him and worked with him, and we’ve had the opportunity to perform his quintet with him as well. But ‘Arcadiana’ was

the starting point in the relationship.”

“We made a choice from the very first to put a lot of energy into contemporary music,” Bulbrook says, “and I think that’s something the group is known for. It was our choice, though, not just to rip through as many premieres as possible, but to pursue direct relationships with composers. Perhaps ten years ago, programming ‘Arcadiana’ might have been a challenge to some presenters. But now we actually treat it like canonical repertory.”



The Calder Quartet

Norman’s reworked “Sabina” is a short piece — about eight minutes — by Bulbrook says “there’s a kind of timbral connection between Norman and Adès. There’s a lovely continuity between the sound worlds.

“Andrew has created different pieces for us, for different situations,” he says. “We’ve been working with him since the quartet was founded, and he’s really taking off now. He’s also writing a new string quartet for us to premiere in the spring.”

For Bulbrook and violist Moerschel, playing at Jordan Hall is a homecoming of sorts. The entire quartet lives in the Los Angeles area now, but both Bulbrook and Moerschel grew up near Boston — Moerschel’s father Joel recently retired after three decades with the BSO — and performed in youth and prep ensembles together. “It’s really special for us to play in Jordan,” Bulbrook says. “Jon and I started here, and played in lots of orchestra pre-college events at Jordan. When you’re a little kid practicing hard, you dream about these things.”

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